

# The Hot Days of the Cold War

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“On my honor, I have neither given nor received any unacknowledged aid on this paper.”

The origins of the cold war up to 1953 can be divided into three main areas: ideological, attempts to expand influence and check expansion, and the Korean War.

Ideologically, the Cold War, in many ways, was a resumption of previous hostilities. The United States was the land of capitalism, the Soviet Union the land of socialism; each society was rooted in philosophies that could not coexist. Communism's goal was to destroy capitalist society; likewise the United States was generally hostile to the Bolshevik regime: its troops fought the Reds during the Civil War, and the US refused to even recognize the legitimacy of the Soviet state until November of 1933.

(Thompson, A13) The only reason that the US and the USSR became allies was because of necessity and the sharing of a common enemy; other than the need to defeat Hitler, the two had little if anything in common. As soon as his defeat was a foregone conclusion, their alliance began to wane and the two resumed their preexisting hostility. In addition, both took on a very aggressive foreign policy attitude as well, since both nations were victims of surprise attacks. Each determined to never allow such a situation again, and vigilance and standing tough were valued dramatically over appeasement and compromise.

As Germany was crumbling, both the US and the USSR realized postwar spheres of influence would be a contentious issue; each sought to advance its own interests while limiting the influence of the other. Stalin clearly felt entitled to a large amount of territory in Eastern Europe; Russia and the USSR had been subject to devastating invasions throughout the centuries from both east and west, and while Czarist expansion in the nineteenth-century established enough of a security zone in the East with its mountainous borders, the west, with its flat planes, was still deeply vulnerable. In just

the years 1914-1941 alone, Russia and the USSR suffered through four invasions from the west: Germany invaded in both world wars, the Allies landed through western ports during the Russian Civil War, and Poland attacked in the 1920's. The USSR, a lone socialist state in a sea of capitalist ones, felt it could rely on no one but itself for security. Annexing territory in Eastern Europe and installing non-hostile regimes there would finally establish the long sought-after security for Russia's to its west.

Yet this security concern would come into direct conflict with US desires to establish democracy and free-market economies in Europe. This was the US security strategy, as it felt nations in which the people, not dictators, made the decisions would tend to avoid war, and that free market economies and intense international trade would destroy incentives for war and increase ties between nations.

In the closing days of the war, it was determined that that the USSR, having paid in blood the costs of the war, would be able to annex portions of East Prussia, Finland, and Czechoslovakia, Romania, and all of the Baltic Republics, and would also engage in a joint occupation of both Berlin and Vienna. It would occupy eastern Germany and eastern Austria, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria on the condition of later setting up free elections. Yet at the July 1945 Potsdam conference, Stalin reneged on this agreement, saying he could not permit these states to set up governments that would be hostile to the USSR; this moment marks the beginning of the Cold War as the period of cooperation between the two powers gave way to competition.

Events in Europe then unraveled rapidly; in 1946, a civil war in Greece resumed between communists and monarchists, which neither the USSR nor the US incited. The USSR was naturally inclined to support the communists. Those worried about a

communist takeover asked the US to intervene; Truman then asked Congress for a \$400 million aid package for the Greek monarchists and for Turkey, another country of vital location that was susceptible to revolution and to Stalin's ambitions. What emerged was the Truman Doctrine, a US policy preventing communist revolutions from succeeding. The monarchists gained the upper hand with this aid and would defeat the communists in 1949, and Turkey stabilized, preventing the possible formation of two Soviet satellites.

In line with the American strategy of promoting stable, democratic, free-market regimes, the Marshall Plan was enacted in 1947 and poured an enormous amount of aid into Western Europe, helping to stabilize volatile situations in France and Italy, which may have gone communist. Though this aid was extended to the USSR and East-Central Europe, Stalin declined this aid, wanting to limit the relationship with and influence of the West. Stalin also reintroduced a form of the Comintern in the fall of 1947, the organization by which the USSR had attempted to export communism. By the end of the year, the USSR had set up communist puppet regimes in most areas it occupied, and staged a successful Communist coup in Czechoslovakia in 1948.

Stalin was particularly concerned with what he saw as Western attempts to create strong anti-Soviet puppet states in western Germany and Japan. These concerns were strengthened when Truman bluntly turned down Stalin's offer to annex northern Hokkaido and refused to let the Soviets in on the occupation of Japan. In addition, Stalin felt the A-bombs dropped on Japan were used as a means to intimidate the USSR into deferring to US interests in the region. When Britain, France, and the US started integrating their occupation zones in western Germany, this was the final straw for Stalin. He closed off all land access to jointly occupied Berlin, deep in Soviet-occupied eastern

Germany, in an attempt to intimidate the West in backing down and withdrawing from Berlin. In response, the US commenced the Berlin Airlift. Supplies poured continually into Berlin from thousands of round-the-clock flights and kept western Berlin well supplied, much to the consternation of the Soviets. Both sides exercised restraint with their military forces, wanting to avoid a war; the Americans decided against smashing through the blockade with their army, and the Soviets declined to attack the unarmed cargo planes supplying Berlin. After eleven months, Stalin ended the blockade, his idea having backfired as 1949 saw the creation of a strong and Western-backed west German state; the Soviets created their own puppet east German state in response.

Though the West could take comfort in the defeat of Greek communists in 1949, the same could not be said to be true of China, where Mao Tse-Tung's communists finally took power. Though relations between Mao and Stalin had been icy dating back to Stalin's support of both the Chinese communists and their opponents in the 1920s and close cooperation between the two was not likely, the prospect of two communist nations, one the world's largest, the other the world's most populous, seemed a real prospect to the West. In addition, the Soviets successfully tested their first nuclear weapon in 1949. The West, fearing this newly volatile situation, formed NATO to contain Soviet aggression; this would eventually lead the USSR to form a counterpart Warsaw Pact in 1955. World War III, it seemed, was around the corner. (Thompson, 368)

Then a war in Korea, a former Japanese colony, began. The south of Korea had been occupied by the US, the northern part by the Soviets, since the end of the war. Both withdrew in 1949, the US leaving in place a democratic regime, the USSR a communist one, led by Kim Il-Sung, a protégé of Stalin's and former member of the Red Army. Kim

twice asked Stalin for support for an invasion of South Korea in 1949, emphasizing how quickly success would ensue, and was rejected both times. Stalin did not want a war even though he may have been nervous about Chinese influence in the area. Yet after the US Secretary of State made a speech early in 1950 emphasizing the lack of importance Korea played in US foreign policy, Stalin understandably thought that the US would not intervene and interpreted this as a “green light” for Soviet intervention. Still smarting from the Berlin Airlift and wanting to limit the growth of Japan as a postwar power by extending his influence in the region, Stalin finally agreed to support Kim, though he still expressed reservations. Yet the US –and the UN— responded swiftly, sending a large force under veteran General Douglas MacArthur into Korea that succeeded in pushing back the communists to the Yalu River, on the Chinese border, by November 20<sup>th</sup>. Yet against US expectations, on the 25<sup>th</sup>, the Chinese launched a massive invasion that pushed MacArthur’s UN forces all the way past Seoul. The situation would eventually end in a stalemate on the old dividing line between US and Soviet occupation zones on the thirty-eighth parallel. During this war, both Americans and Soviets used restraint: though Soviet pilots flew many combat air missions, the Soviet Red Army never officially joined the conflict, the US kept the presence of Soviet pilots a secret to avoid public outrage and military escalation, and both sides refrained from using nuclear weapons.

1953 saw the end of the Korean War and Stalin’s death. The US and USSR had by now developed policies of avoiding all out war with each other, allowing for competition of interests through conventional “proxy” wars in other states, and both developed policies of vigilance and restraint at the same time as well. Thus this “Cold War’s” characteristics were defined in the immediate postwar era of 1945-1953.

***Source:***

Thompson, John M. 1996. *A vision unfulfilled: Russia and the Soviet Union in the twentieth century*. Lexington: D. C. Heath and Company.